

Texas test resister wins multiple scholarships

By George N. Schmidt

A Texas student who resisted the TAKS test has won several college scholarships, in part because of her courageous stand against test mania. Below is an article published in San Antonio March 18.

[TAKING TAKS TO TASK. San Antonio Express-News. March 18, 2006 by Jenny LaCoste-Caputo]

When Kimberly Marciniak first decided to take a stand against standardized testing by boycotting the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, critics from all sides begged her to change her mind.

Since public school students in Texas must pass the test to earn a high school diploma, teachers and guidance counselors worried the intelligent young girl was throwing away her chances for college. A guest on a local radio talk show said she'd made a "stupidly stubborn decision."

Now Marciniak, 18, has the ultimate "I told you so." She has been accepted to her top three college choices and offered scholarships from each one.

Marciniak is part of a growing contingent of students nationwide showing their opposition to high-stakes testing by putting down their pencils.

In Massachusetts, New York, Washington and California, students and parents have boycotted state tests in recent years. And a growing number of colleges and universities also are turning their backs on standardized tests by dropping the requirement that applicants submit an ACT or SAT score.

A senior at North East School of the Arts — a magnet program at Lee High School — Marciniak has a stellar academic record and spent last school year studying in New Zealand.

Despite the advanced placement courses she's taken and the classes she's aced, Kimberly will count among the school's dropouts this year because of her refusal to take the TAKS test.

"I think a lot of people thought when it actually came down to graduation requirements that I would eventually take the test," Marciniak said. "I always felt like if I was doing the right thing and I felt so strongly about it, then no matter what happened, I'd be OK."

If the growing backlash against standardized tests keeps up, Marciniak may have plenty of company.

More than 730 four-year colleges and universities nationwide do not use the SAT or ACT to make admissions decisions about a substantial number of their applicants. Policies vary from school to school.

Some schools may not require test scores at all, while others exempt students who meet grade-point average or class rank criteria. Some schools may require the scores but use them only for placement purposes or to conduct research studies.

The list of test optional schools is growing. The schools range from small liberal arts colleges to state college systems in California and Oregon and includes more than 40 schools in Texas, the University of Texas at Austin and at San Antonio, among them.

But that doesn't mean students who don't take the TAKS will have an easy time being admitted. It's possible to attend a Texas college without having officially graduated, admissions officers say, but policies vary.

Robert Schaeffer, the public education director for FairTest, an advocacy organization based in Cambridge, Mass., that opposes what it calls the misuse of standardized tests, keeps an online list of colleges that don't consider test scores for admission.

He said half a dozen colleges in the past year have switched to test optional — including Knox — and he expects several more to make that decision in the coming year, based on his conversations with admissions officials at those schools.

"Many colleges are realizing that test performance is not a true measure of a student's merit," Schaffer said.

Amen to that, say students like Marciniak and Mia Kang-Radlet, who as a freshman at MacArthur High last year refused to take a TAKS practice test and the real thing when it rolled around.

They say the "drill and kill" mentality of test preparation is destroying their thirst for knowledge and creating a generation of students who are missing crucial lessons in critical thinking, creativity and discovery.

"The issue for me with TAKS has never been whether or not I can pass, but whether or not I can participate in something I believe is unfair," Marciniak said. "Civic responsibility is something I learned about in my seventh-grade year. You have no right to complain about the president if you don't vote. Well I look at TAKS the same way. I would have no right to complain if I know there is something I can do to change it."

Marciniak applied to small, "test optional" liberal arts colleges. Her top two choices: Hampshire College in western Massachusetts and Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., both offered her scholarships based on her decision to boycott TAKS.

In her acceptance letter, Hampshire admission officials signed off with a P.S. that read: "Kim, your willingness to stand up for your beliefs is inspiring. At Hampshire, you'll be able to combine your passion for social justice, cultural studies, education reform and the visual arts into a meaningful education."

The school offered her its “To Know Is Not Enough” scholarship for active participation in democracy to bring about change, worth \$30,000. Annual tuition at Hampshire, plus room and board, is just over \$40,000 a year.

“The school’s motto is ‘To know is not enough’ and it implies that knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not enough and it should be knowledge in service,” said Elaine Thomas, director of college communications for Hampshire. “We have a definite commitment to civic action. We particularly attract and like students who ask a lot of questions. Our approach to education is inquiry based. That’s what makes Kimberly a perfect fit here.”

Knox awarded Marciniak its top social concerns scholarship, worth \$28,000 over four years, plus an additional visual arts scholarship. The school was founded by social reformers in 1837 and some of its earliest students included women and African Americans, said Paul Steenis, vice president of enrollment and dean of admissions. Knox charges about \$32,000 per year, including room and board.

“When we saw Kim take this stand on very principled grounds, really taking some risks, it really resonated with us,” Steenis said. “Just this past year we took the bold step of becoming a test optional college. It’s a growing trend particularly among more select colleges to move beyond test scores. It’s really a response to this world that is increasingly obsessed with testing at all levels. Teaching to a test has become more important than learning.”

Marciniak said her parents — her mom graduated from Wellesley College and her dad graduated from Harvard University — stood behind her decision to boycott the test, even if it jeopardized her college chances.

She said she hopes she’s proven a point.

“I was so thrilled not only to be accepted but also thrilled that in a sense I proved all those disbelievers wrong. My decision did not hurt my college application process like everyone feared,” Marciniak said. “In fact I saw the exact opposite — the colleges I applied to looked on a principled boycott as a positive thing.”

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